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AN OPPORTUNITY TO BE CREATIVE

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The core of evangelism is making connections with people. As ambassadors for Christ (2 Corinthians 5:20), we would do well to look to His example. Ellen White reminds us that “During His ministry Jesus devoted more time to healing the sick than to preaching. His miracles testified to the truth of His words, that He came not to destroy but to save. . . As He passed through the towns and cities He was like a vital current, diffusing life and joy wherever He went. The followers of Christ are to labor as He did. We are to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and comfort the suffering and afflicted. We are to minister to the despairing, and inspire hope in the hopeless.”¹ The suffering, afflicted, and hopeless do not wander into our churches looking for relief. Therefore, we must find innovative and creative ways in which to reach out and get to know those in the community who are hurting. Allow them to see the genuine care churches have for the well-being of the community and the individuals that comprise it. Make an effort to know their names, not just having them know the name of the church. One must take the time to get to know others, before earning the right to be heard when sharing the gospel with them. When people see and feel that you care, they will want to know why.

In this chapter we will discuss three strategies for innovative evangelism: 1) Promote innovations; 2) Foster belonging and ownership; and 3) Celebrate community relationships.

Strategy 1: Promote Innovations

There is as much potential for innovative ideas as there are people in your church. Church leaders should embolden members to not wait for someone to tell them what to do in regards to ministry, evangelism, and relationship building. Believers are to be encouraged to pray continually that God will lead them to opportunities, big or small, in which they can bless others. “God will surely help those who seek Him for wisdom. We are not to wait until opportunities come to us; we are to seek for opportunities, and we are to be ready always to give a reason for the hope that is in us. If the worker keeps his heart uplifted in prayer, God will help him to speak the right word at the right time.”²

Give permission to be creative!

When we think of evangelism, we often think of large public programs provided by the denomination or churches. However the most effective programs and opportunities come from individual members. “It is

not the dramatic and the grandiose of large programs of evangelism that get the work done. It is the mysterious chemistry of countless ordinary Christians faithfully living out their kingdom lives.”³ The collective ideas and synergy of mobilized members can have a far reaching impact in lives for Christ.

Pastor David Jamieson had an idea for putting ministry into the hands of his members after he read the book *Kingdom Assignment* by Danny Bellesi. He asked the church board to let him have \$3,000 from the community services A-OK (Acts of Kindness) program fund. Surprisingly, the church board agreed, even though the church budget was behind by \$90,000. After a sermon on the parable of the talents, Pastor Jamieson handed out 30 \$100 bills. He told the recipients to take the money, pray over it, and take the money outside of the church walls. They would have 90 days to multiply the money and use that to do an act of kindness anywhere in the world. By the end of 90 days, they had multiplied the original \$3,000 to over \$100,000.

The Young Adult Sabbath School class took \$100 and wanted to help a 2 year old girl, Emily, who was battling leukemia. Her family had to drive 8 hours to Vancouver for treatment, often missing work. The Young Adult class had heard about her through the local media. They decided to do a 24 hour soccer-a-thon and used the \$100 for a website and marketing. The event attracted about 100 people to play soccer in the cold for 24 hours. The Aldergrove church (now known as Church in the Valley) and community raised over \$21,000 for little Emily and gained extensive media coverage.⁴ This is just one of the many stories of how the members multiplied the money given to them.

The Kingdom Assignment project was a success. By the end of the year, Aldergrove SDA made the church budget and gave away \$125,000. The Kingdom Assignment Association found out and gave them a Kingdom Assignment award recognition.⁵ When the members took on the role of creating and implementing ways in which to reach the community, God blessed financially and a stronger bond between the church and the community they serve was formed. Pastor Jamieson noted that because of their Kingdom outreach several community members began attending church and have given their lives to God.

Strategy 2: Foster Belonging and Ownership

Growing churches provide a variety of low-pressure volunteer options for attendees (even not-yet members) in order to foster a sense of belonging and ownership. Ownership leads to loyalty. “And by volunteering to serve the Lord, they [people] develop and mature spiritually.”⁶ Have places for everyone regardless of age or status to help. Low commitment, non-threatening teams are good for new members. Andy Stanley and Ed Young, “found that getting them on a team prevents them from coming in the front door and going out the back; if they’re involved in a ministry from the beginning, they’re much less likely to fade away and never do anything.”⁷

Encourage Total Involvement

Olivia came across a flyer for an upcoming evangelistic series at the local Seventh-day Adventist Church. She had fond memories of her neighbors bringing her to Sabbath School as a child and decided to check out the series. Once there, she accepted the gospel and decided to get baptized. Her husband, Mark, while supportive of her decision did not feel the same way himself. When Mark

started coming to church with Olivia the congregation took the initiative to get to know and welcome him. Friendships were formed and one couple in particular mentored Olivia and Mark. Because he no longer felt like a visitor, Mark wanted to become involved and volunteered as a greeter. Through their interactions, the pastor and leadership team noticed that he had a gift for teaching. So as Mark began to learn more about God and grow in his understanding of Scripture, he was occasionally asked to help teach Sabbath School class. After a little while Mark realized that his beliefs were the same as the church members and asked to be baptized. He and the pastor studied together and Mark officially joined the church that had already become his family. When asked why he wanted to join the church, Mark credited the love and acceptance of the congregation because of their willingness to let him be involved. It was the meaningful relationships which were formed within the church that brought about a feeling of belonging and ownership. Healthy churches understand that fostering relationships between members and attendees are a significant part of a thriving community.⁸

In order for evangelism to make an impact, there needs to be a commitment from the members to be involved. Relationships must be built.⁹ Multiple friendships from within the church must be maintained in order for a new convert to stay in church. It has even been shown that some non-believers attend church because of the relationships they have there.¹⁰ In fact, in a study released in 2013, the Barna Group noted that Millennials credit friends and family as the number two reason why their faith has grown.¹¹ For them, prayer was number one and reading the Bible was number three.

When meeting new people, look for ways in which to genuinely connect with them. “Speak to them, as you have opportunity, upon points of doctrine on which you can agree. Dwell on the necessity of practical godliness. Give them evidence that you are a Christian, desiring peace, and that you love their souls... Thus you will gain their confidence; and there will be time enough for doctrines. Let the heart be won, the soil prepared, and then sow the seed, presenting in love the truth as it is in Jesus.”¹² It is essential that we speak to the hearts of people.

Strategy 3: Celebrate Community Relationships

Have a missionary mentality. “Missionaries see people as unique and valuable. Jesus saw people as individuals and in groups. The crowds were important to Jesus because of the people in them. Crowds are not trophies to be won. Neither are the crowds ‘projects’ to be completed. Influencing masses of people is not for the leader’s affirmation or self-worth. Crowds are important because of the incredible worth of people.”¹³ Therefore, it is important to engage with individuals in the community through intentional relationships. This will lead to discernment regarding the needs of the community, which in turn will lead to more opportunities to embrace them, which will lead to more engagement. It is a missional transformational cycle.¹⁴

Be Aware of Community Needs

Tom walked into Costco on their annual community day. Noticing booths from local charities and businesses promoting their products and services, he began to think about how God could use an opportunity like this for his church to connect with the community. He ran back to the church to ask the pastor

why they didn't have a booth. The pastor encouraged him to go ahead and arrange for one. They called two other members who were doctors to help. The church-sponsored booth provided free blood pressure and cholesterol checks, magazines, and had a sign-up for a kid's soccer team that quickly filled up. So many people came to visit their booth that focused on free services for the community, that Costco rewarded the church with a year's supply of cakes for their weekly potlucks, asked the doctors to provide analysis for their employees, and offered a free booth for the next community day. The following year, the church's booth not only shared about health but also provided literature and information about upcoming seminars for the community. With time, people began visiting the church and attending seminars. Many even joined as new believers.

The above is just one example of creative outreach that worked. Some churches host block parties, Vacation Bible Schools, Financial Peace University, Divorce Care, cooking classes, concerts, and English as a Second Language courses. Know that not everything will succeed with building bridges in the community; however, still aim for innovation and excellence. Keep trying until you find something that works for you and your community. The more you know your community, the better you are able to find areas of need. Check new ideas and ministries against your vision: "The catalyst for introducing and facilitating change in the local church is a God-honoring, mouthwatering, unambiguously clear vision."¹⁵ Encourage your members to undertake "a level of involvement that stretches them and calls them to take up the basin and towel and wash feet just as Jesus has called us to do."¹⁶

Ellen White also saw the need for building up relationships outside of the church for the purpose of evangelism. "We are not to renounce social communion. We should not seclude ourselves from others. In order to reach all classes, we must meet them where they are. They will seldom seek us of their own accord. Not alone from the pulpit are the hearts of men touched by divine truths. There is another field of labor, humbler, it may be, but fully as promising. It is found in the home of the lowly, and in the mansion of the great; at the hospital board and in gatherings for innocent social enjoyment."¹⁷

Conclusion

Most evangelistic ventures take time, months, and maybe even years before you see the fruits of your investment. This is consistent with any type of relationship—they take time and effort to mature. "Relationships are like bank accounts: They don't just happen."¹⁸ All evangelism takes intentionality and should be done out of love for humanity and God and a desire to connect the two. The lack of an immediate result is not a sign of failure as evangelism is not about us, but about God. Most of us have no doubt heard stories of people who have been prayed over for years before finally deciding to come to Christ. Kristy is currently finishing up Bible studies with Jane who first heard and rejected the Gospel from a co-worker 40 years ago but recently came into the church through the local community services program. Jane and her former co-worker have rekindled their relationship and will be reunited at Jane's baptism.

What is your passion? Where can God use you and your passion to connect with people? Pray for God to reveal to you how He is working in the lives of your non-Christian colleagues and friends. Where might you have a chance to impact people as you go about your day?¹⁹ If you feel that you cannot come

up with a way to connect with people, a simple evangelism method is to invite someone to your church. It may sound too simple, but research has shown that 82% of unchurched people are likely to come to church if they are invited. But the invitations are not being made. “Only 21 percent of active churchgoers invite *anyone* to church services in the course of a year. But only 2 percent of church members invite any unchurched person to church.”²⁰ You don’t have to be an evangelist or have that spiritual gift in order to share your personal experiences with Christ. When you let your relationship and journey with Christ show in your life then “Everything is outreach!”²¹

Sidebar:

1. Creative Community Care

In the past effective community services included stop smoking plans, clothes and food distribution, etc.. Monte Sahlin²² notes that today effective ministries includes job-finding and training, family counseling, substance abuse programs, potty training geared for young mothers, reading for new immigrants, and budgeting and financial planning. The new programs are not only to deal with the physical aspect of ministry, but do include emotional, social, and spiritual ministries.

Study the demographic needs of your community and devise your ministries accordingly. There are many organizations that specialize in trends, demographic data and the specific needs of your community. Build a database listing the skill sets of members that can be called on. A mechanic maybe willing to donate labor costs or a dentist could provide free cleanings for those without insurance.

2. Sports Ministries

One of the fastest growing ministries today is sport ministry. It does not require a budget or many people. If you have a gym, open it once or twice a week and invite the community to come. When I (Joe) was a pastor we opened our gym twice a week to the community. The people came, sometimes as many as 50 or 60 people. The event lasted about 2 hours. Right in the middle of these two hours, our youth pastor had a short devotion about 5-7 minutes.

One of our members started a soccer program for the kids on Sunday afternoon. Because soccer is rising in popularity, we had no problem attracting about 40-50 kids from the community. We always ended with refreshments and invitation to join our youth group. There were always one or two every week or so that joined.

We also started several teams for baseball, soccer, or basketball. These teams attracted people from the community, the church, and significantly increased the number of active young members. Also, many of the previously inactive youth now felt connected and became involved in the church.

3. Community Bible Study Group

You would be amazed how many people from a non-church background are actually interested in learning about the Bible. Start a community Bible study group that is held outside of the church building. For example, a businessman started a breakfast Bible study for his co-workers in a conference room at work. Others use the common room of their

apartment complex for Bible study. Young adults can create a Bible study group relevant to their context.

4. Park Ministry

Take the Gospel to the parks. This kind of witnessing takes place with effectiveness especially during the summer time. One church goes to the park every Sabbath afternoon in the summer. They invite people to come and join them for songs and a devotional thought. They had a special program with gifts for the kids and refreshments for everyone at the end. This is a great way to get the youth and young adults involved in church ministry. Make sure this is presented as professionally as possible as this may be the only image of Christianity that some people get to see.

5. Children's Ministry

Ed Young shares, "On a regular basis (at least six times a year) the life-changing message of Christ is presented. If any children make a decision for Christ, their parents are contacted and invited to attend a class entitled KidFaith. Everything the kids have been taught about Christ is presented again to the parents and the kids. Attending KidFaith gives parents the opportunity to be involved in their children's decision to accept Christ."²³ Monthly birthday party for kids, Vacation Bible School during evangelist meeting. Children's programs in the park during the summer, children's choir, backpack giveaway. Youth and young adults can be involved in this type of ministry.

Endnotes

1 Ellen White, *The Desire of Ages* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1898), 350.

2 Ellen White, *Gospel Workers* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1915), 120.

3 Robert T. Henderson, *Joy to the World: Spreading the Good News of the Kingdom* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1991), 190.

4 David Jamieson, "Better to give.... AND unconditionally," Press Release, Seventh-day Adventist Church (British Columbia), December 8, 2006. <http://www.marketwired.com/press-release/Better-to-give-AND-unconditionally-626280.htm>. [accessed July 3, 2017].

5 Interview with Pastor David Jamieson by S. Joseph Kidder and Kristy Hodson in Berrien Springs, MI, on January 26, 2016.

6 Andy Stanley and Ed Young, *Can We Do That? 24 Innovative Practices that Will Change the Way You Do Church* (West Monroe, LA: Howard Books, 2004), 104.

7 Ibid., 74.

8 Randy Frazee, *Making Room for Life: Trading Chaotic Lifestyles for Connected Relationships* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), 35.

9 The short video "Sacred Roots" by the Barna Group explores the importance of creating a sense of community where people feel loved, known, and accepted in order to grow. https://www.barna.org/research/faith-christianity/video/sacred-roots#.Vrlm_ZXSnmM [accessed July 3, 2017].

- 10 See a 2014 article about non-believers attending church, Rev. Peter M. Wallace, "Is There Room in the Church for Non-Believers," www.huffingtonpost.com/rev-peter-m-wallace/is-there-room-in-the-chur_b_5951728.html [accessed July 3, 2017] and a 2013 article about atheists starting their own churches Gillian Flaccus, "Atheist 'mega-churches' take root across US, world," Associated Press, November 10, 2013, <http://news.yahoo.com/atheist-mega-churches-root-across-us-world-214619648.html> [accessed July 3, 2017].
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 - 12 White, *Gospel Workers*, 119–120.
 - 13 Ed Stetzer and Thom S. Rainer, *Transformational Church: Creating a New Scorecard for Congregations* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2010), 49.
 - 14 Ibid., 49.
 - 15 Andy Stanley, *Deep & Wide: Creating Churches Unchurched People Love to Attend*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 270.
 - 16 Kevin G. Harney & Bob Bouwer, *The U-Turn Church: New Direction for Health and Growth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011), 111.
 - 17 Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1898), 152.
 - 18 Andy Stanley and Bill Willits, *Creating Community: Five Keys to Building a Small Group Culture* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 2004), 155.
 - 19 Henderson, 181.
 - 20 Thom S. Rainer, *The Unchurched Next Door: Understanding Faith Stages as Keys to Sharing Your Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), 24–25.
 - 21 Harney & Bouwer, 114.
 - 22 Monte Sahlin, *Adventist Congregations Today: New Evidence for Equipping Healthy Churches* (Lincoln, NE: Center for Creative Ministry, 2003.), 19–20.
 - 23 Stanley and Young, 59.
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